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SOWING BESIDE ALL WATERS.

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SERMONS

AT

ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL.

No. IV.

PREACHED ON SUNDAY EVENING, DECEMBER 19, 1858.

BY

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VICAR OF LEEDS.

LONDON :

BELL AND DALDY, 186, FLEET STREET.

1858.

Price One Penny.

LONDON:
PRINTED BY RICHARD CLAY,
BREAD STREET HILL.

SOWING BESIDE ALL WATERS.

ISAIAH xxxii. 20.

“Blessed are ye that sow beside all waters, that send forth thither the feet of the ox and the ass.”

THE prophet, Isaiah, had preached Repentance to Israel with little apparent success. The people (speaking of the majority) refused to give heed to his exhortations, and turned a deaf ear to his reproofs.

Now it had been granted to Isaiah to look into the future, and he foresaw the call of the Gentiles and the Christian Dispensation. There he beheld the Messengers of the Lord receiving their commission, “Go ye, and teach all nations;” and he pronounced them to be blessed as compared with himself, sent to a single people, rebellious and gainsaying.

This he expresses in metaphorical language, and by reference to a process of husbandry, or to the manner of sowing grain, particularly rice, which still prevails in Eastern countries, and with which the Israelites were familiar.

The mode of proceeding is thus described. The sowers cast their seed upon the waters, when, by the swelling of

the river, the waters cover the land. Beasts of burden are employed to tread down the mud or slime, to render it capable of receiving the seed as it sinks.

You will remember another allusion to this custom in a passage often quoted from Eccles. xi. 1 : "Cast thy bread"—i.e. thy seed—"upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days ;" that is to say, when the waters overflow the banks, then, acting in the spirit of faith, cast thy seed upon the waters, and you will find it again, after many days, in a rich and abundant harvest.

I have selected for my text the passage thus explained, from the second lesson appointed for this evening's service, because it is also capable of a deep spiritual meaning, applicable to the circumstances of the present assembly.

There is spiritual seed to be sown. It is to be sown by the side of all waters. It is, however, sown in vain unless the moral soil be cultivated in which it is designed to take root.

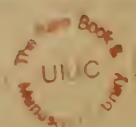
I shall call your attention, First, to the nature of the spiritual seed we have to sow :

Secondly, to the importance of watching the times, and of availing ourselves of the opportunities providentially opened to us, for sowing the seed :

Thirdly, to the conditions under which the sowing of it results in a moral, spiritual and heavenly harvest.

I. And first, my brethren, the seed—what is it ? The answer is given by our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, who, when explaining the parable of the Sower and the Seed to his disciples, saith, "the seed is the Word of God."

And the ministers of Christ are the sowers of the seed, and they sow the seed when they speak to you of Jesus ; when they point out to you what would have been the helpless, hopeless state of man, except for the mighty salvation effected for our race by our Lord and only Saviour Jesus Christ : when they remind you that, since the welfare of the universe depends upon the maintenance of that one law which connects the happiness of the creature



with his obedience to the Creator ; the welfare of the whole moral and intellectual creation of angels and arch-angels, and all the hosts of heaven, cognizant of the works of God, offered an impediment to the pardon of a rebellious race, unless something were done equivalent to their condemnation, to uphold the authority of that law, the universal violation of which could convert the universe into a hell ; for hell is there where the sovereignty of God is defied, and that of the creature asserted or assumed : when they remind you that the human race, in itself incapable of rescue or of elevation, would, except for the Divine interposition, have gone on for ever sinning—sinning in the next world as well as in this ; and, eternally sinning, would have been eternally miserable : when they remind you that nothing less could have averted the otherwise inevitable consequences of sin, than a miracle which shook the moral universe to its centre,—the Incarnation of the Deity : when we remind you that our nature was, as at this time, assumed by the everlasting Son of God, one with the Father and the Holy Ghost ; and that thus, having a nature in which He could Himself render obedience to the law, He did, by his own obedience to it, so magnify the law before relaxing its penalties on our behalf, that He hath removed the impediment to our pardon, restored the human nature to communion with the Divine, and re-opened to us the gates of heaven.

Ay, brethren, and we sow the seed as, passing from the philosophy to the facts of Christianity, we tell you of all that was endured by our dear Lord and only Saviour Jesus Christ, when, being incarnate, his obedience was tested, and its perfection proved, as it only could be proved, by a meek submission to temptations and a patient endurance of sufferings, mental, spiritual, bodily, which, like waves rolling upon waves, continued to accumulate, until the human nature He assumed could bear no more ; when we lead you to Calvary—there, where devils and diabolical men having done their worst, the victory was achieved, the obedience completed, our redemption

accomplished, and the fountain of grace opened, the waters of which have gone forth to replenish the earth, and to cleanse for ever the soul of penitent mankind : we sow the seed when, to them who are of a fearful heart, who, in their incipient repentance, feel the stings of an upbraiding conscience, and dread the wrath of an offended God, we say, Look unto Jesus and be saved, all ye ends of the earth ; He is able to save to the uttermost, all who come unto God by Him ; He is a Saviour, omnipotent to save ! We are sowing the seed when to those who labour and are heavy laden, the depressed in spirit, the bereaved, lone, lorn, and careworn, we repeat our dear Lord's most blessed invitation, " Come unto me and I will give you rest."

Oh, come unto Him, the weary for rest, the oppressed for ease, the troubled for peace, the penitent for pardon, the mourner for joy, the slave for freedom, the lost for salvation.

It is thus that we sow the seed. But although the ministers of Christ be pre-eminently the sowers of the seed, they are not so exclusively.

To sow the seed is, in some measure, the duty of all who name the name of Christ ; to the parent especially to his child, and of every Christian in his daily conversation and walk.

II. What we have to lament is, that when this duty is admitted, its performance sometimes fails of success, and it cannot be denied that the cause of failure is not unfrequently to be traced to some fault in the well-intentioned sower of the seed. We see the children of pious parents sometimes careless, if not profane, through a disinclination to things serious, occasioned by the injudicious enforcement of discipline in early life, and through an attempt to inculcate the principles of religion without watching for the softer moments of life, when, through the affections, the mind is opened to admonition and advice.

Many have been confirmed in their errors, or repelled from a careful consideration of the great verities of

Christianity, by the unseasonable discussion of solemn truths in general conversation, where the vain or the impassioned argue not for truth, but for victory.

A just reproof, in like manner, has not unfrequently produced anger rather than repentance, because it has been administered before remorse has softened the heart.

Taking the case of husbandry suggested in our text, as an illustration of our duty, we can imagine the sower to be ready, and the seed to be prepared, and yet the sower moves not ; the seed is still in his granary ; for he knows that it would be like casting pearls before swine, to scatter his seed before the waters rise ; he bides his time ; he watches the swelling stream ; and then when the waters have arisen, his labours commence.

In every nation, and in every clime, it is indeed as much the farmer's duty to watch the seasons as it is to sow the seed.

And in spiritual husbandry, this it is that distinguishes the sober-minded Christian from the mere fanatic.

Both desire to sow the seed, but the one does and the other does not watch for the fitting time, and await the convenient season.

"To everything," saith the Holy Spirit "there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."¹ And in accordance with this principle, the apostolic precept is, "As we have opportunity let us do good unto all men, especially unto them that are of the household of faith." Be ready ; be like men prepared to sow the seed ; but wait till God in his providence affords the opportunity.

If zeal be a virtue, so is discretion ; and zeal without discretion is like zeal without love—a human passion, not a heavenly grace.

But this is not the only lesson that we are to deduce from our text. We are to sow beside all waters.

The proper motive for attending the House of God is a desire to glorify our heavenly Father's name, and to

¹ Eccles. iii. 1.

obtain the Divine blessing through the appointed means of grace.

But this is the motive in whom? In those in whose hearts the seed of life has already taken root.

But is this the case with all—with even the major part of an ordinary congregation?

We are compelled, therefore, to regard our congregations as containing not the converted only, but the unconverted also.

We do not attempt, like the Pharisees of old, to distinguish between the two, for we are not to judge. Who among us are Christians indeed and in truth, and who are such only by baptism and mere profession, can only be known to the Searcher of hearts. All that we know is, that both classes are present, and that we must act accordingly.

There will be always some who attend the public services of the Church under the influence of inadequate, if not improper motives. They may come from the mere force of habit; they may come, attracted by the eloquence of a preacher; they may come, attracted by the charms of sacred music; they may be attracted by the novelty of such a scene as that of which we ourselves are witness now; they may come to scoff—what care we! Here they are; and who knows but that some who came to scoff may remain to pray.

We would repel none. From whatever motives they may come, when the church is filled, the waters have risen; and on the waters, sowing in faith, we scatter our seed, praying the Lord of the harvest to give the increase.

We sow beside all waters: whatever may have been the motive which brought you here, being here, we speak to you of Jesus.

Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world; He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.

Behold the Lamb of God, which hath bought us with the price of his own most precious blood; He is the

only way to the Father ; He is the only door into heaven ; He is the only foundation of eternal life ; He is the only Saviour of perishing sinners.

Behold the Lamb of God, who hath redeemed us from the bondage of sin and death, and hath given us power to become the sons of God. In his own blood He washes us from our sins ; by his own righteousness he justifies our souls ; through his spirit He renews our nature ; through his grace we obtain the love of the Father, and the communion of the Holy Ghost.

III. But although we are to seize the opportunities afforded us in the providence of God,—although we are to sow beside all waters, still the sowing of the seed will not, of itself, be sufficient.

The sower of old, although he did not trouble himself to observe whether the waters, as they lay before him, were clear or muddy, nevertheless took precautionary measures that the seed sown should be trodden down into the soil.

Not only must the Word of God be preached, it must also be received into the heart—rooted, grounded in the soil. We may speak of the Lord Jesus Christ, and we may recount to you all the mercies of redeeming love, but this will not suffice ; you, brethren, you too have somewhat to perform ; you must receive Him into your heart, to be your Prophet, Priest, and King, your Glory, and your sole salvation.

God is almighty ; He can do all things : but when He endowed certain of his creatures with reason,—an endowment which implies, within certain limits, moral freedom,—by that very fact He set limits also to his own omnipotence in his dealings with them.

Although He will assist his rational creatures in their weakness, and when they ask for help, yet He will not, by any exercise of his omnipotence, annihilate his highest gift by overpowering their will—their will is still left free.

He offers salvation to all ; He has provided it in our

Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ ; but we must accept the gift which He, in his mercy, provides. Jesus is all-sufficient ; but we must appropriate Him by faith.

The practical question relates always not to what God *can* do, but to what God *will* do.

He could give us the harvest without our sowing the seed ; He could make the seed to grow without our preparing the soil ; but this He will not do.

He could raise us to newness of life, and produce in us the fruits of the Spirit without the intervention of means, or the preaching of the Gospel ; but He has, as the general rule, ordered it otherwise.

He requires the spiritual seed to be sown ; He requires the spiritual seed to take root in the heart, before the harvest of grace can be realized, or the fruit be produced.

What, then, is required, besides hearing and reading, before the truth will sink into the depths of the soul ?

What is required, my brethren, is meditation ; meditation, conjoined with earnest prayer, that He who speaks to you by his minister, may speak *in* you by his own most blessed Spirit. It is by meditation that we tread down the seed into the heart and soul.

For to meditate is to concentrate the mind on things eternal and divine : on the worth of the soul, and the vanity of the world ; the flight of time, and the uncertainty of life ; on the hour of death, the resurrection of the body ; the day of judgment, the torments of hell, the joys of Heaven ; on the attributes, the works, the Providence of God ; on the necessity and truth of Divine revelation ; on the evil and the curse of sin ; on the guilt and helplessness of man ; on the nature and necessity of repentance ; on the means of grace, and the hope of glory ; the victories of Christ in the soul, the triumphs of Christ in the world, and the dominion of Christ over death and the grave.

These, my brethren, are some of the subjects to which the soul rises when it meditates upon the cross of Christ

and its resulting blessings. And when, by meditation and prayer, the truths of the Gospel are engrained in the soul, then comes the harvest—the moral harvest: and mark, my brethren, what that is: I say, mark it, for there is some misunderstanding here; and it may be well to bear in mind what is the characteristic of Christian morality—its distinguishing principle. It does not consist in mere religious sentiment, for in that the Pantheist can participate: it does not consist in self-imposed acts of penance, for in that the Hindoo excels: it does not consist in the intolerance of all who differ from us in opinion, for that is the characteristic of Mahometanism: it does not consist in a routine of ceremonial observances, for no one is more regular in this respect than the Idolator: it does not consist in separating ourselves, on the plea of greater holiness, from our co-religionists, for this did the Pharisees: it does not consist in a seclusion from the world, or in a withdrawal from its business, its interests, or its enjoyments; for the Christian is called not to asceticism, but to a religion which has the promise of the life which now is, as well as of that which is to come.

But, my brethren, mark our Divine Master's injunction:

“Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”—Matt. vi. 33.

What things? The things which pertain to the comforts, the conveniences, the enjoyments of life, which may be sought, but only in their proper place!

You will observe, then, that the question does not relate to the lawfulness of worldly pursuits. This is admitted. Neither does the question relate simply to our seeking the kingdom of God.

Many do this, in whom there is an entire absence of the distinguishing principle of Christian morality.

Men may attend to their religious duties, and be industrious, and honest, and sober, and charitable; but the whole question relates to the time when, and to the circumstances under which, all this is done. They may attend

to their religious duties where it is not inconvenient to do so ; they may be honest, when honesty is evidently the best policy ; they may be charitable, when acts of charity do not involve acts of self-denial ; all other duties may be performed, where they concur with self-interest or inclination.

But the question is, whether we be prepared to renounce what we think to be conducive to our worldly interests, when that which we desire to do is manifestly inconsistent with Christian principles ; whether we subject ourselves to detriment and inconvenience, rather than forego a religious privilege ; whether we are always ready to postpone pleasure to duty ; whether we will maintain our principles in spite of the persecution which the accuser of the brethren and the enemy of souls is sure to raise in some shape or other, against the servants of a crucified Master.

This is the distinguishing characteristic of Christian morality,—the seeking of the kingdom of God and his righteousness, not in the second place, but in the first.

And I call this the moral harvest which results from the acceptance of the seed of life into the heart.

The sower of the seed proclaims the fact, there is one God and one Mediator between God and man, the Man, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all. The seed sinks into the heart : if He gave Himself for all, He gave Himself for me ; if He gave Himself for me, He is my best and nearest friend ; and if He be my best and nearest Friend, then to serve Him is my first and nearest duty.

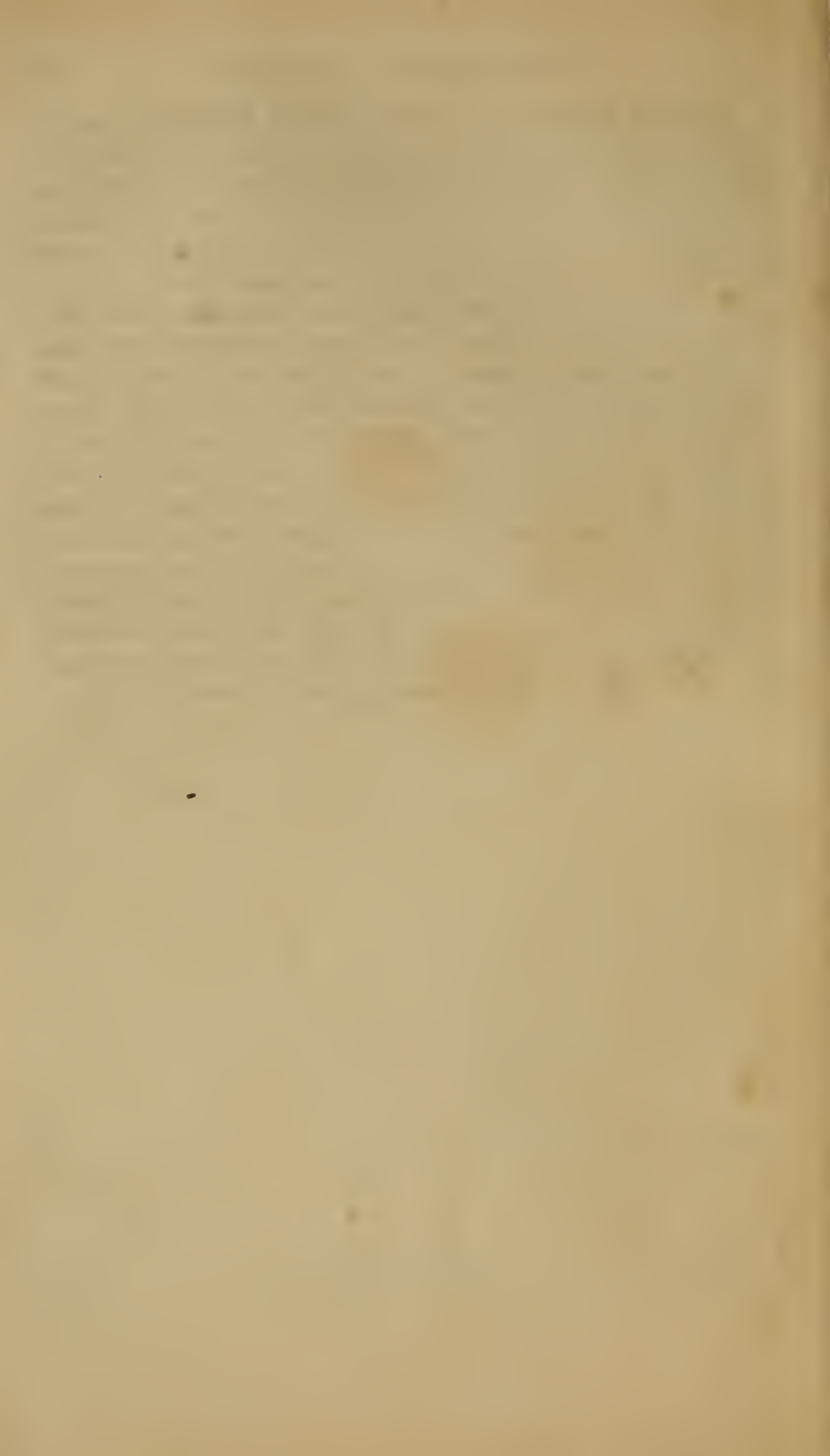
Take this principle with you, my brethren, and you will have that within, which will be your safeguard amidst all the temptations of life, and which will sanctify whatever you shall do. The principle, dormant in your soul, will be ready at any moment to be roused into action, when a question of conduct shall arise, or the tempter in his sophistry, draw near.

Yes, for there will be contemporaneously, a spiritual harvest. When, by a living faith, the Lord Jesus is accepted by the soul, the soul is sanctified by the presence

of the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost will be to you, in every doubt, the Spirit of wisdom to guide you on your way ; in every distress, the Spirit of love to console the heart ; in every danger, the Spirit of power to protect the soul ; in every want, the Spirit of grace to supply your need : He is the Paraclete, the Comforter.

And then, my brethren, there is the eternal harvest ; there, where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest ; there, where those who sow in tears shall reap in joy ; there, where those who have sown unto the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

And now, my brethren, to conclude. Over the living stream which swells beneath this mighty dome, I scatter the spiritual seed, when, in my Master's name, I lift up my voice and say to every sinful soul, "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?" And may the God in heaven grant, that he who thus casts his bread upon the waters—careful not himself to be a cast-away—may find it, after many days, a harvest of souls, in the garners of heaven.



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